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The English “Self” under
Siege: A Comparison
of a *Memsahib*’s Private
Journals and Her Novel
*The History of George
Desmond*

ASHOK MALHOTRA

MARY Sherwood, who was later to become an immensely popular author of didactic Evangelical children’s fiction and catechetical literature, reported a curious incident that occurred while she was residing as a *memsahib* in India.¹ In her journal entry for 1813 she reports witnessing a *nautch* in Kanpur where three Indian dancing girls performed before a group consisting of herself, her children, and a set of British East India Company officers.² Sherwood reports that she was inspired to author an episode where she would recapture the experience of viewing

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¹ A *memsahib* is the wife of a colonial official.

² In a *nautch*, Indian female dancers performed in front of a largely male audience. The dance was often associated with sex work as the dancers would solicit spectators after a performance. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Company men often attended such performances or held them in their homes. See Nandini Bhattacharya,

the *nautch* with one key difference. Rather than record the dance from her own viewpoint “as a matron surrounded by little ones,” Sherwood chooses to disassociate herself completely as the narrator and describes the scene from the perspective of a “half intoxicated young man.”³ The author subsequently pens a scene in her journal of a fictitious young man narrating his sensations while viewing the dance. This imagined incident was Sherwood’s inspiration and entry point for writing *The History of George Desmond; Founded on Facts Which Occurred in the East Indies, and Now Published as a Useful Caution to Young Men Going Out to That Country* (1821), and it is in fact recycled verbatim in this novel, which was published eight years later. The young man, who in Sherwood’s novel takes the form of the central protagonist, George Desmond, describes the three dancing girls as “under a thin mask of voluptuous gaiety, present[ing] the expression of habitual and determined malignity.”⁴ Moreover, during the performance the voyeur is lured in by the spectacle:

I imperceptibly became not, indeed amused, or pleased—for such was not the character of my feelings, my reason and my taste being both offended—but *fascinated, enthralled, and bewitched!*

Though not without some sensations of fatigue, I continued to gaze till I had no power to move; my imagination being all the while possessed and wrapt by a strange fascinating kind of influence, which I can almost suppose to have been aided by some satanic power. (*The History of George Desmond*, pp. 105–6)⁵

Reading the Splendid Body: Gender and Consumerism in Eighteenth-Century British Writing on India (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1998), p. 130.

³ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 2, 1811–15, p. 193. The Sherwood Family Papers, held in the Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library, at the University of California, Los Angeles, holds the correspondence, journals, and important documents of the Sherwood Family, beginning with Mary Sherwood and then her children. I refer in this essay to Mary Sherwood’s journals, which record her experiences from year to year in diary form and contain important outgoing and incoming correspondence. After initial citations, further references to each journal volume is included in the text.

⁴ [Mary Sherwood], *The History of George Desmond; Founded on Facts Which Occurred in the East Indies, and Now Published as a Useful Caution to Young Men Going Out to That Country* (Wellington, Salop: F. Houlston and Son, 1821), p. 100. This scene is repeated verbatim in Sherwood’s later novel. See Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 2, 1811–15, pp. 193–202.

⁵ See Sherwood, journal, 1811–15, pp. 193–202.

While the male narrator detects the underlying menace of the performance, he is incapable of resisting the seductive power of the Indian female dancers. In addition, he attributes his own loss of self-control and his inability to retain objective detachment, when viewing this erotic performance and form of entertainment, to some supernatural demonic power.

The episode in which Sherwood imagines viewing the *nautch* as an inebriated young man both departed from and aligned with the author's own personal experience as a woman witnessing the dance. A few pages later in her journal, Sherwood deliberately contrasts her own real-life reactions to the spectacle to those of her fictitious young man. As Sherwood notes in her journal, "Of course the effect produced on me could not be similar in all things described by the young man but certainly I was astonished, fascinated & carried, as he describes, to the golden halls of ancient things" (Sherwood, journal, 1811–15, p. 202). In other words, according to Sherwood, although she could not share the sense of being sensually overawed by the performance, the dance did have a hypnotic allure that allowed her temporarily to lose herself in an orientalist dreamscape. Moreover, Sherwood argues that her gender and age gave her a certain immunity, unlike the intoxicated young man, whose passive gaze means that he is totally reeled in by the spectacle. Sherwood, according to her journals, was empowered with an ability to deconstruct the technical aspects of the dance, which in turn deny the performance of some of its illusory power. While the intoxicated Desmond is unable to see through the trick that enabled the dancing girls to draw "nearer and nearer, but without apparent step or exertion. . . . like that of fabled beings through the air" (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 107), Sherwood relates in her journal that it is because their "pedal extremities" are "almost as flexible and manageable as the fingers."⁶ Sherwood further believes that her residence in India, alongside the fact that she is a woman, gives her the critical distance "to comprehend the nature of the fascination which persons of this description exercise over the minds of many a fine young English

⁶ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 2, 1813, p. 203.

youth working the utter ruin of all their prospects in this Earth" (Sherwood, journal, 1813, p. 202). In effect, she claims the ability to stand back and generalize about the effect that *nautch* dancers and Indian women have on Company officers.⁷

The discrepancy between Sherwood's viewing of the *nautch* and her fictional representation of the performance, as I demonstrate in this essay, is reflective of a whole set of dissonances and deficits between the author's portrayal of India in her novel *The History of George Desmond* and her actual experiences as a *memsahib* living within the subcontinent, as documented in her private journals. By examining this novel alongside Sherwood's unpublished private journals I expose the ways in which Sherwood's novel both aligns with, as well as veers away from, her personal experiences in the subcontinent. I argue that the novel was intended as a specific intervention that aimed at providing, as noted in the title, "a useful caution" to young white English men considering a career in colonial India.⁸ The novel can be interpreted as a call by a *memsahib* and Evangelical for the reform of an imperial masculinity that was in dire need of regulation. In this context, the degeneration of the central protagonist, George Desmond, was supposed to serve as an example to young Company recruits who would face similar spiritual and physical dangers while working in the subcontinent. I consequently correlate the narrative to Sherwood's own

⁷ Sherwood's pretensions to detached objectivity are problematic when it is considered that she is fantasizing about inhabiting the gaze of the white male who is being seduced by the Indian dancing girl. In effect the sexually aroused young man provides a site for Sherwood's own gaze and homoerotic curiosity toward the *nautch* girl to be displaced, and then in turn to be sublimated so that it accords with heteronormative desire. Furthermore, Sherwood does not allude to the way that she has both embellished and diminished the performance in this fictional representation. When Sherwood witnesses the *nautch*, there are white women present in addition to British male officers. In her imagined narrative, however, there are only two white men present to view the dance, namely the young man and an older white man. Thus, her imagination has reconstructed the dance as a commoditized spectacle specifically for the voyeuristic male gaze. The *nautch* is relegated to a lurid display meant primarily to evoke sexual desire from white men, rather than a mode of performance to entertain a general audience.

⁸ Although Scottish, Irish, and Welsh were of course involved in the British colonial administration, I use English rather than British here, as Sherwood's text seems to be aimed at promulgating an exclusive notion of Englishness that is being corroded by life in colonial India, rather than a more inclusive British identity.

experiences as a wife of a colonial official who was involved in Evangelical proselytizing efforts in early-nineteenth-century India. I here situate the racist stance adopted in the novel to the author's own hostile attitudes toward Indians and Indian culture. In addition, I argue that *The History of George Desmond*, by the very literary mode it adopts, amplifies Sherwood's existing racial prejudices by creating a heightened sense of the otherness of Indianized spaces and peoples.⁹ I propose that it does so by deploying Gothic literary tropes, such as doubling, drug-induced visions, and the deployment of landscapes, to explore the central protagonist's interior life, with Indianized locales and characters often functioning as markers of the darker recess of this young English man's self.¹⁰ I will further demonstrate that the admonitory function of the novel did not allow space for moments when racial and class distinctions momentarily subsided, or for moments when the colonizer could empathize with the colonized subaltern subject, as was the case in Sherwood's private journals. To illuminate these issues, I will examine the coping strategies that Sherwood displayed in her own real-life interactions in India, as evidenced in her private journals, for distancing herself from the unsettling scenes she witnessed in her travels around the subcontinent. I argue that the objectifying psychological processes that she

⁹ I use the term "Indianized" here to convey a British orientalized constructed notion of India, rather than any accurate depiction of India. In this respect, I am drawing on Edward Said's thesis that Europeans represented the locales and peoples of the Orient according to certain preconceptions and stock tropes, which were themselves influenced by hegemonic power relations. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. xii-xiv.

¹⁰ The Gothic novel was a dominant form of fiction in Britain from the closing decades of the late eighteenth century until the early nineteenth century, with the first Gothic novel considered to be Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Other prominent Gothic fiction novelists of this period include Ann Radcliffe, William Beckford, and Mary Shelley. Common to most Gothic novels was their aim to explore interior mental processes with landscapes and architecture, being used to reflect the psychology and state of mind of their characters. These texts often attempted to create feelings of terror in their imagined readers by placing the central characters in alarming situations and disorientating surroundings, sometimes even deploying the supernatural to create these effects. Gothic novelists also occasionally doubled good characters against evil characters to explore the darker side to the "self." See Robert D. Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," *PMLA* (1969), 282-90.

employed, some of which were typical modes of colonial surveillance during this period, are denied to her fictitious young male narrator, whose “self” has been lured in, fragmented, and disorientated by the hypnotic allure of India and its aesthetics. I propose that Sherwood’s novel is notable for the way it undercuts notions that colonized subject peoples were governable and could be morally improved. By doing so, *The History of George Desmond* calls into question the very premises that the colonial civilizing mission rested upon. This makes it a fairly exceptional text when compared with Sherwood’s other catechetical fiction, and indeed more generally within the canon of British-Indian colonial literature.

Mary Sherwood has been largely neglected as an author by colonial and postcolonial literary scholars who specialize in nineteenth-century British-Indian literature. Scholars, except for Joyce Grossman and Nandini Bhattacharya, have tended to focus primarily on the fiction of later British India authors such as Philip Meadows Taylor, Rudyard Kipling, and Flora Annie Steel. This is surprising, as Sherwood succeeded in gaining a mass readership and reaching an international audience within her own lifetime. In 1836, James Harper from New York even wrote to Sherwood requesting that she supply him with a complete list of her publications. Harper wished to publish her entire works in one volume and needed an authoritative list because there were many imitators falsely publishing their work under Sherwood’s name as a “sure passport to a ready & rapid sale.” Harper further wrote: “such has been the very great popularity of your books in our country that thousands—tens of thousands, & I may safely say hundreds of thousands of some of them have been sold.”¹¹ Although Sherwood did not limit her range to narratives deploying an Indian setting, her “India” tales, nevertheless, had considerable appeal. *The Ayah and Lady* (1816), *The Indian Pilgrim* (1818), *The History of George Desmond* (1821), *The History of Lucy and her Dhaye* (1823), *Arzoomund* (1829), and *The Last Days of Boosy, the Bearer of Little Henry* (1842) all went into

¹¹ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 11, file 3, after 1831, unnumbered.

multiple editions.¹² Her most commercially successful work, *The History of Little Henry and his Bearer* (1814), had run to thirty editions by 1840 and had been translated into several languages, circulating in such diverse locales as Burma and Germany.¹³

Grossman and Bhattacharya have provided insightful studies of Sherwood's popular catechetical tales such as *Little Henry and his Bearer*, *Lucy and her Dhaye*, and *The Ayah and Lady*, but they have mentioned *The History of George Desmond* only in passing.¹⁴ Bhattacharya and Grossman discuss the novel in reference to Desmond's desire for the Indian *nautch* girl Amena. Bhattacharya argues that the *nautch* girl performing her sexuality in the open for financial gain offended prevailing British bourgeois patriarchal orthodoxies, which advocated separate spheres for the sexes, with men operating in the public sphere and respectable women being consigned to the private domestic sphere where their libidinal urges would be closely regulated.¹⁵ Conversely, Grossman, in her brief examination, views the novel alongside published biographies of Sherwood, noting that the author's fictional representation of the unfaithful Indian *nautch* girl departed from what Sherwood knew to be the norm—that of British colonial officers using inequities of class and race to have temporary sexual relationships with Indian women and then abandoning them when no longer convenient.¹⁶ Yet Grossman

¹² Sherwood also wrote several popular moralistic novels that were set in England, such as *The History of Susan Gray* (1815), *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818), and *The History of Henry Milner* (1822).

¹³ *Little Henry and his Bearer* established the reputation of her publisher, Edward Houlston. Sherwood writes in her journal: "Mr Houlston's name became well known & from being an obscure person in a small obscure town took his place at once among superior booksellers" (Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers [Collection 1437], box 3, 1815–17, pp. 476–77).

¹⁴ See Joyce Grossman, "Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers: Mary Sherwood's Indian Experience and 'Constructions of Subordinated Others,'" *South Atlantic Review*, 66, no. 2 (2001), 14–44; and Nandini Bhattacharya, "Maternal Plots, Colonialist Fictions: Colonial Pedagogy in Mary Martha Sherwood's Children's Stories," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 23 (2001), 381–415.

¹⁵ See Bhattacharya, *Reading the Splendid Body*, p. 135.

¹⁶ See Grossman, "Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers," p. 26. There are two key published biographies of Mary Sherwood: *The Life and Times of Mrs Sherwood (1775–1851): From the Diaries of Captain and Mrs. Sherwood*, ed. F. J. Harvey Darton (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1910); and Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Life and Times of Mrs. Sherwood (chiefly autobiographical) with Extracts from Mr. Sherwood's Journal during his Imprisonment in*

fails to offer any hypothesis as to why Sherwood, in this particular fictional text, departed from what she knew to be the norm.

Perhaps the reluctance of scholars to provide further examination of *The History of George Desmond* is due to the fact that the novel sits uncomfortably alongside the author's catechetical narratives and children's literature. Indeed, I argue that the novel's direct criticism of the colonial administration in India, its problematic political stance, and its imaginative identification with a young male narrator's interracial sexual desire for the Indian *nautch* girl all made Sherwood fear that it was an unsuitable text for a respectable woman writer to publish under her own name.¹⁷ This novel, though, deserves more critical attention, as it is the first written by a Briton who had extensive lived experience in India and who sought to represent the subcontinent for an adult audience. The novel embodies

France and Residence in India, ed. Sophia Kelly (London: Darton & Co., 1854). Indrani Sen has also, in a recent edited volume, collected samples of various autobiographical writings by *memsahibs* in colonial India. She has drawn on the two aforementioned biographies for excerpts of Sherwood's writings. See *Memsahib's Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women*, ed. Indrani Sen (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008). These biographies and edited volumes, while useful, draw from Sherwood's private journals, which I refer to in this essay. I use Sherwood's private journals because both biographies omit key incidents from Sherwood's life that I seek to interrogate in this essay.

¹⁷ In her journal entry for the year 1820, Sherwood reported: "During the whole of the period since my arrival in England I had been much flattered about my writings—and fancied myself at the very top of the tree as a writer for children—much astonished & offended therefore I was when in the beginning of October—I got a letter from Daniel Wilson—a letter says my diary which contained a cool unprovoked censure of all my writings with exception only of Henry & his Bearer—with an admonition to keep to my sphere as a woman & not meddle with high matters." The patriarchal censure by Wilson, who was later to become a Bishop, left her feeling rattled and made her consider what she "was about" and whether she was "going too fast" as a woman writer. A page later in her journal she notes that she sent off the manuscript of *The History of George Desmond* "without a name" even though it was her customary practice at this point in her literary career, and from then on, to attribute works to herself. This is significant in so far that the name Mary Sherwood carried huge weight in the literary marketplace in the early nineteenth century. One would reasonably assume that if she had decided to attribute the work to herself it would most likely have significantly boosted sales. Sherwood's decision to publish the work anonymously indicates that she feared that this novel, in particular, would invite invective diatribes from self-appointed male guardians of propriety for overstepping the boundaries of respectable subject matter for a lady writer, and thus mar her carefully cultivated reputation as a woman author of didactic children's narratives. See Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 3, 1818–25, pp. 132–33.

many of the tropes and preoccupations that became the hallmarks of later British novelistic representations of India by writers such as Taylor, Kipling, and Steel: interracial sexual desire, alienation, anxieties that experience in the subcontinent would destabilize British identity, as well as an exploration of the relationship between the colonizer and her/his colonized subjects. Before engaging in a textual analysis of the novel, however, it is important first to chart Sherwood's first entry in India and her impressions of the subcontinent and its peoples, as these factors play a crucial role in the subsequent formation of *The History of George Desmond*.



Mary Sherwood accompanied her husband, Captain Henry Sherwood, who had been appointed paymaster with the Fifty-Third regiment, to India in 1804. She was to reside in India a total of eleven years, following her husband to the various military barracks in which he was stationed. These locations included Calcutta, Dinapur, Berhampur, Kanpur, and Meerut.¹⁸ During her travels in India, Sherwood documented numerous examples of what she perceived as Indian backwardness and barbarity. For instance, after Sherwood and her husband visited a village in Dinapur, she writes in her journal: "we could read the indicators of every rude passion on the countenances of almost every person in that hut."¹⁹ Her sensory faculties during journeys across India were often overloaded. On returning from a native bazaar in the "black town" of Madras, she is full of "disgustful feelings" after smelling "burnt manure," as well as hearing the "creaking of the wheels of bullock carts" and "the cry of unhappy babies" (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 67). Sherwood describes the holy Hindu city of Benares as a "pagan city" and as a land ruled by the "Prince of darkness" (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 394). The Indian city takes on the topographical landscape of hell, or one of the damned cities of the Old Testament. She was further shocked by visual iconic

¹⁸ See Grossman, "Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers," pp. 15, 17.

¹⁹ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 2, 1804–8, p. 103.

representations of disproportionate multi-headed and multi-armed Hindu Gods such as Ganesha, Shiva, and Durga, which appeared to her as monstrous and idolatrous (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 27).

Sherwood perceived the moral, physical, and unhygienic characteristics of the indigenous inhabitants as stemming directly from their religious practices and beliefs, rather than poverty, remarking that “Idolaters in general are a dirty disgusting race” and that black women are dissipated because they “worship demons” (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 42). While Sherwood in her journals alludes to Indian children dying of famine, she does not make the causal connection that this was most likely exacerbated by colonial economic exploitation rather than religious beliefs. Her journals abound in reporting second-hand and sensationalistic rumors of indigenous barbaric customs such as parents feeding their children to sharks in order to satiate the Hindu Gods, or the multitudes of outcasts in one island called Saugur resorting to cannibalism.²⁰ The fictional George Desmond’s and his wife Emily’s observations on their boat tour around India that the “cottagers were filthy and disgusting in the extreme” and that “their countenances betrayed something of that grossness of conception and habit, which invariably grows out of the abominations of idolatry,” echo the perspective of the Sherwood couple when traveling

²⁰ See Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 2, 1808–11, p. 340. Sherwood’s descriptions, which express outrage when confronted with Indian customs or perceived customs, are similar to the depictions of India by missionaries in the early nineteenth century. Traveling missionary caravans touring Britain with magazines and artifacts from the colonies emphasized the sensationalistic aspects of Indian culture. Such materials reflected the shock when missionaries from Britain were confronted with something completely alien to their experience or heard second-hand, sensationalistic accounts of Indian customs and religious practices such as Sati, female infanticide, and Kali worship. It can equally be explained as a deliberate strategy by missionary societies to secure funding from the British public by portraying Indians as fanatical heathens in desperate need of enlightenment. Similarly, European physiognomists and phrenologists such as J. C. Spurzheim propagated essentialist notions about the inherent racial characteristics of “natives” from the colonies and argued that such locales were more prone to producing freaks and human curiosities. See Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 5–7; and Hermoine de Almeida and George H. Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (London: Ashgate, 2005), p. 223.

around the subcontinent (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 191). At the beginning of Sherwood's travels in India, she felt her family constantly under siege and in danger of being corrupted in the heathen land of India. She exclaims in her journals, "Oh my God save my baby from this corruption," and further: "my lot at present seems to be fallen in a barren soil, for I am surrounded by Pagans—or by Christians who seem only to be so nominally" (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 67). Sherwood, moreover, prays to God that her young infant son "should never be left in the care of native servants—nor upon any account know their language" (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 67).

Sherwood's derogatory observations regarding India and its inhabitants were in certain respects framed by her experience as a *memsahib* and as a devout Christian. One of the reasons more British women such as Sherwood accompanied their husbands to India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was because the East India Company, under the administrations of Lord Cornwallis and Lord Wellesley, was taking an increasingly derisory attitude toward the various indigenous cultures within India. The well-reported impeachment of Warren Hastings in England from 1788 to 1795 for the alleged corruption and atrocities carried out during his tenure as Governor General of Bengal had fueled the perception in the British press that the colonial administration in India, and more particularly young white Company men, had become corrupted by exposure to "native" culture. In response to these broader anxieties, subsequent Governor Generals such as Cornwallis, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and Wellesley, in the early nineteenth century, initiated a progressive Anglicization of the colonial executive, removing Indians and mixed-race Anglo-Indians from key positions and replacing them with white Britons. Colonial administrators consequently made greater efforts to separate physically the official elites and Indians by planning civil stations adjoined to, but separate from, Indian towns.²¹

Furthermore, the colonial executive increasingly discouraged white Company officials and soldiers from taking Indian

²¹ See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p. 2.

concubines, or *bibis*, as they argued that such relationships had a morally corrupting influence and would lead to racial miscegenation.²² Within this context it was thought that if more officers brought their wives from Britain to the subcontinent with them, it would provide an effective countermeasure to this phenomenon. Wives of colonial officials often attempted, where possible, to mimic the domestic spaces and daily customs found in British bourgeois households. It was the role of the *memsahib* to create an Anglicized home that would serve as a bastion of racial purity offsetting unnecessary acculturation and Indianization. *Memsahibs*, such as Sherwood, were firmly involved in seeking to limit cultural dislocation for their families and in imposing British domestic civility in India. Sherwood's position as a *memsahib* in early-nineteenth-century colonial India informed her novel *The History of George Desmond*, given that she presents an environment where imperial masculinity, and Anglo-Indian life more generally, have become corrupted by Eastern sensuality and require moral reform.

The novel begins with George Desmond, upon reaching manhood, being persuaded by his mother to accept a position as a writer for the East India Company in Bengal. Before embarking to India, Desmond spends a year in the home of a former highly placed Company official, Mr. Fairfax, where he is instructed in various Indian languages.²³ After completing his studies, Desmond embarks for Calcutta, where he subsequently forms a friendship with the world-weary John Fairfax, the brother of his former language instructor, and his socialite wife, Mrs. Fairfax. In the Fairfax's home and in British Calcutta, Desmond encounters

²² A *bibi* is an Indian woman who was the temporary consort of a British colonial official or soldier. See Doreen M. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 20.

²³ The fact that Desmond learns more as a student of Indian languages under Mr. Fairfax in Britain than he does subsequently from Brahmin Pandits in India needs to be situated in relation to emerging discourses that argued Indian languages were better studied in the metropole where they were less likely to be corrupted. Haileybury College in Britain, where cadets were trained to be Company administrators, was founded as a panacea for Fort William in Bengal, in that while the college supplied languages it also provided religious instruction to prevent cadets from becoming too Indianized. See David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization, 1773–1835* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 106.

liberal moral codes and overly indulgent lifestyles. However, having proved his skill in Indian languages, he receives a promotion and is stationed to an outpost called “Junglepoor” (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 86). During Desmond’s journey to Junglepoor, he takes a respite at Berhampur, where he is invited to dinner by a British civilian who has gone “native” by adopting Indian dress and cultural preferences. It is during this meal that Desmond witnesses the *nautch* dance and is seduced by Amena, one of the dancing girls. Amena and her purported brother, Shumsheer, accompany Desmond to Junglepoor, where he resides for three years leading a dissolute existence that consists of smoking the hookah, hunting tigers, and lounging on the sofa. Shumsheer and Amena gain a greater hold over him, with Shumsheer becoming his head servant and Amena apparently giving birth to his child. Desmond eventually, however, secures a promising position in Calcutta. After abandoning Amena and his purported daughter, he arrives with Shumsheer at the Fairfax home, where he encounters Emily, a young English woman, with whom he falls in love and ultimately marries. The couple establishes a home at his new posting only to find that Desmond’s sinful past catches up with them. Amena arranges to have Emily poisoned through the family *Ayah* (servant).²⁴ The young man becomes deranged after his wife’s death. Shumsheer and Amena take this opportunity to keep him incapacitated by supplying him with “large quantities” of “intoxicating drugs,” while they siphon as much money out of him as they can (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 236).

When Desmond finally regains some measure of sanity, he dispenses with Amena, finding a new position in a desolate post between Dacca and Calcutta. He lives there in a degraded “Indianized” state witnessing *nautches*, riding an elephant every morning, and maintaining an entourage of sycophant servants, with his evil servant Shumsheer plunging him further into debt. The situation comes to a head only after the *Ayah* who poisoned Desmond’s wife is caught. She subsequently confesses that she poisoned Emily at the instigation of Amena and Shumsheer, who have long since fled. She further reveals that Desmond has been duped all along in that Shumsheer and Amena were lovers

²⁴ An *Ayah* is an Indian nanny employed by European families in colonial India.

rather than siblings, as Desmond had supposed, and the child that he thought was his was in all probability Shumsheer's. After the trial, Desmond falls into a life-threatening fever. He is only saved from death by his chaplain friend Mr. Melmoth, who, with the aid of his wife, restores Desmond back to health and converts him to Evangelical Christianity. The repentant East India man stays in Calcutta to work off his debts, and upon his return to England he decides that he will attempt to convert his family to Evangelical Christianity.

The History of George Desmond thus depicts the corrosive effects that a life in India can have on a young English officer. Throughout the narrative, Sherwood deploys Indianized spaces to reflect the progressive fragmentation of Desmond's identity. Upon his first arrival in India, Desmond encounters government buildings in Calcutta. He observes that "the walls were not painted, or papered, as in England, but merely white-washed"; he further notices that there was an "immense mirror" and that "the floor was covered with a glossy kind of matting" (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 61). The illusory and insubstantial surfaces that Desmond describes create the impression that he is adrift in an unreal world and unable to root himself on firm ground. It is noticeable that the post in which Desmond wastes three years of his life married to Amena is called "Junglepoor"—the name pointing to a moral wilderness. Furthermore, after Emily dies, and at a time when Desmond is most alienated from England, he resides in a house of "ruinous appearance" with "a few stagnant pools" and a "swampy plain" (*The History of George Desmond*, pp. 249, 248). The derelict Indian house functions as a metaphor for his alienation and the stagnation of his soul, and the swampy plain represents the moral quagmire into which he has sunk. The element of unreality present in the Indian landscapes is mirrored by the plot contrivance of the hero's discovery that Shumsheer and Amena are not siblings but lovers, and that the daughter he thought was his own was in fact fathered by his Indian servant. Sherwood's plot revelation has the effect of revealing to both Desmond and the reader that they have been duped by the illusory falsehood of India. In addition, to a certain extent it absolves Desmond of his earlier misdeeds of abandoning his Indian *bibi* and bastard daughter

by making the reader aware that all this time Amena has been a faithless consort.

Sherwood's deployment of Gothic hallucinatory effects is evident in the scene in which Desmond is drugged by Amena and is overcome with "hellish fancies" when seeing Amena and the *Ayah* prepare his daily cocktail of drugs:

By the position of the light Amena's too beautiful profile was accurately defined to my sight: her hair was knotted at the top of her head, and her churda was thrown back. The face of the old hag, who sat opposite to her, was yellow, wrinkled, and emaciated; and to my disordered imagination, the countenances of these females suggested the idea of demons in human forms. (*The History of George Desmond*, pp. 228–29)

In effect Desmond is consumed by this drug-induced and nightmarish vision. Yet at the same time, the image reveals the moral depravity of Amena, with the old decayed hag mirroring the rottenness of the *nautch* girl's soul, so far disguised by her outward beauty. One must remember that Desmond as the white *sahib* is completely disempowered in this scene in that he is helpless on his bed while these two Indian women conspire together to keep him insensible.²⁵

Sherwood compounds this sense of the white man emasculated by Indian femininity a few pages later, when Desmond awakes and attempts to rise from his bed only to have Amena come up "to his pillow, supporting [him] in her arms," and resting his "head against her breast" (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 231). The *sahib* is infantilized by his *bibi* in a manner that evokes a helpless baby suckling at his mother's breast. The image brings to mind Desmond's previous dream of the deceased Emily carrying their unborn child "on her bosom" (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 227). However, while Emily is represented as "a beloved wife" nurturing her child, the Indian woman's maternal behavior is presented as unnatural, corrupting and enervating (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 227). It is interesting that it is this scene that is depicted in the novel's frontispiece illustration in Houlston's 1821 edition (see Figure 1). As readers would most

²⁵ A *sahib* was a term for a white British colonial official or soldier.

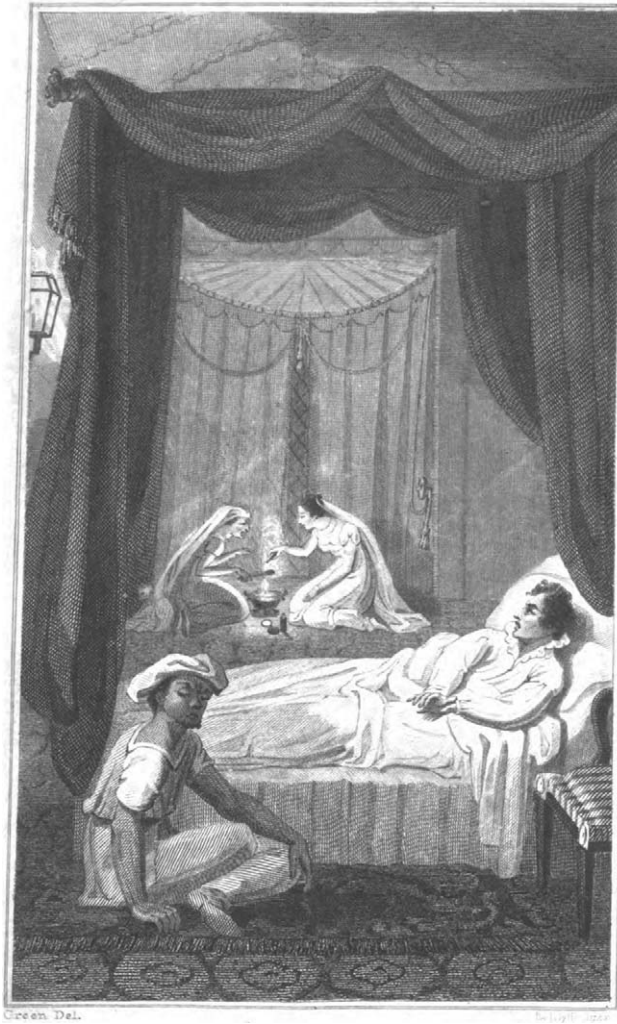


FIGURE 1. Frontispiece illustration to [Mary Sherwood], *The History of George Desmond* (Wellington, Salop: F. Houlston and Son, 1821).

likely view this image before reading the text, its significance lies in the fact that it would most likely help instantiate a reading of this narrative as primarily depicting an imperial masculinity that

has been completely emasculated and disempowered by Indian femininity, as well as the illusory falsehood of India.

In addition to providing an example of the dangers that Indian women pose to young English men, the novel provides a generalized critique of Anglo-Indian society and the ruling elite in India. The home of John Fairfax and the old civilian in Berhampur, where Desmond becomes corrupted, are presented as morally lax locales where Anglo-Indian men and women indulge themselves. At these sites, there is an endless parade of balls and functions, or *nautches*, where men and women intermingle to an extent that contravenes conservative metropolitan bourgeois morality. The ruling elite are portrayed as having their morals and their physical bodies contaminated and corrupted by prolonged exposure to India. Moreover, Sherwood's denigration of the Indianized British civilian living in the "native air" is linked to a critique of an older form of colonial rule encouraged by previous Governor Generals, above all Warren Hastings, which encouraged Company men to adapt to Indian culture and tolerated them taking *bibis*.²⁶

The History of George Desmond skillfully doubles English and Indian spaces and characters, using India to represent the darker and transgressive side of the English "self." For instance, the world-weary civil servant John Fairfax, who resides in India, is contrasted to his exuberant and morally earnest brother in England, Mr. Fairfax. The devout, chaste, and delicate Emily is doubled against her polar opposite, the sexualized and conniving Amena. Moreover, Mr. Fairfax's "elegant and modern villa" in Berkshire, which is decorated tastefully in the Oriental manner, has its opposite in the living quarters in Berhampur of the Indianized British civilian who corrupts Desmond, which is decorated completely in accordance with the "native air" (*The History of George Desmond*, pp. 22, 96). The doubling of pure English

²⁶ At the time Sherwood was in India, Governor Generals such as Lord Cornwallis increasingly advocated for the Anglicization of the colonial administration and inter-racial liaisons were increasingly disapproved of. However, there were still many Company men who still believed in this older, more syncretic form of colonial rule. See P. J. Marshall, "Indian Officials under the East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *Bengal: Past and Present*, 84 (1965), 95–120; rpt. in his *Trade and Conquest: Studies on the Rise of British Dominance in India* (London: Varorium 1993), p. 116.

characters with their Indian or Indianized counterparts serves to demonstrate the disruption and rupturing of the ideal of a homogenous English national identity in the colonial periphery. Life in India has a warping and fracturing effect on the self.

Sherwood's narrative aims to prescribe a set of guidelines for young men on how to interact with the "other" while preserving the English "self" intact.²⁷ Both the British civilian in Berhampur and Desmond, at least for most of the narrative, have failed in this regard because they have become overcome by the sensuality of Indian culture and have abandoned themselves to its allure. In contrast, Mr. Fairfax's appropriation of Indian motifs in his Berkshire home is legitimized because he is distanced enough at his home in England to be detached from India. In contrast to Desmond, whose passive gaze is seduced by India, Fairfax adopts an objectifying and detached perspective when viewing Indian aesthetics. He can thus arrange "the many pieces of China and Indian furniture" so that they cast a generalized "kind of oriental character over the whole little domain" (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 23). An acceptable mode of consumption of India for colonial men seems to be in England, where Indian motifs can be ordered and arranged alongside other motifs from Asia to present a more sanitized, unthreatening, and generalized impression of the Orient. In this respect, Sherwood's stance aligned with political and educational discourses that were prevailing at this time that India was better studied from a safe distance where Britons could not be taken in by Indian culture.²⁸

It is illuminating that Desmond's drug addiction and debt is instigated by Indians rather than being solely due to his predilections. This is reflective of the way in which Company

²⁷ I refer to men here because, as testified in Sherwood's narration of the *nautch* incident, as described in the beginning of this essay as well as in other moments in her life, and as described later in this essay, Sherwood evidently believed that mature Christian women such as herself could view Indian culture and aesthetics with detachment and objectivity.

²⁸ James Mill's argued that his infamous *The History of British India* (1817) benefited from the fact that he had never been to the subcontinent and that he had carried out his research entirely from Britain. He argued that this allowed him to be more impartial and objective than scholars residing in India who had become partial and biased concerning India. See Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's "The History of British India" and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 135.

administrators disproportionately apportioned blame to Indian suppliers and moneylenders for their men's addictions and debt, rather than their employees themselves.²⁹ The drugging of Desmond by Indians to the point where he is incapacitated is of further interest when viewed in relation to the British-India-China opium trade of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Company was primarily paying for imports of tea from China by profits generated from illegally selling opium to the Chinese. This opium, which was produced mainly in Bengal, had to be smuggled by British traders into the Canton ports, as the Qing Chinese Emperor Kia King in 1799 had officially banned opium imports due to anxieties that it was causing mass addiction among the Chinese populace.³⁰ It is significant, though, that in Sherwood's novel it is Desmond who is the victim and the unwitting consumer of opium. This subplot evades the historical reality that it was British imperial commercialism that was the major force behind opium production in India and was smuggling the drug into a country that was relatively powerless to enforce its own ban. On another level, Desmond's consumption of opium reflects Sherwood's possible concerns that the opium trade was potentially harmful to Britain's interests in that young Company men who worked in North East India were more likely to become addicted to the drug, especially considering that the substance was being mass produced in Bengal and thus was readily available.³¹

²⁹ In this respect Sherwood's stance was in line with that of the East India Company administration in India. Regulation acts enacted by the British East India Company in Bengal in 1809 and 1810 increased police powers to limit Indian suppliers of spirits and other intoxicants in military cantonments. The measures reflected an anxiety that excessive alcohol consumption and drug intake was physically damaging East India Company cadets. Moreover, Sherwood's correlation of Desmond's debt to unscrupulous Indians must be situated in relation to reforms made by the Governor General Lord Cornwallis, whose administration had recently increased the wages of Company men partly to make them less reliant on Indian moneylenders, as well as to stamp out administrators and soldiers engaging in illegal trade. See Paul Roberts, *History of British India Under the Company and the Crown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), p. 226.

³⁰ See Peter Lee, *Opium Culture: The Art and Ritual of the Chinese Tradition* (Rochester: Park Street, 2006), p. 220.

³¹ See Kristin Bayer, "Contagious Consumption: Commodity Debates over the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century China Trade," *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 8, no. 2 (2012), 73-94.

It is only the newly arrived English wives, Emily and Mr. Melmoth's wife, who are uncorrupted by the contact zone, along with a strident band of Evangelicalism that ultimately provides the palliative care to restore the young colonial officer to both moral and physical health. In the novel Emily has a morally beneficial effect on her husband. Before her untimely demise, she maintains an orderly household for him and urges him to take a more active interest in Christianity, thus temporarily stemming Desmond's physical and moral degeneration in India. It is, moreover, the devout Evangelical Mr. Melmoth and his wife who nurse Desmond back to both physical and spiritual health. The fact that newly arrived English women and Evangelical Christianity work hand-in-hand with each other within the narrative is unsurprising. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there had been growing calls in Evangelical circles to impose Christianity on a predominantly Hindu India. Charles Grant, a Company official and associate of the Clapham Society, published *Observations on the State of Society among Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain* in 1792. In this influential tract, Grant deployed the practice of *sati* as evidence that the whole structure of Hinduism and Indian society was rotten. He further advocated that Britain should impose Christianity upon India.³²

During this period as well, the *Baptist Missionary Society* (1792), *London Missionary Society* (1795), and the *Methodist Missionary Society* (1813) were established. While these organizations had relatively little impact in India in terms of converting the indigenous population, they had considerable influence in shaping the metropolitan public's perception of the subcontinent. The propaganda output of missionary movements in relation to India was considerable, with the Baptist Missionary Society producing annual reports of events in the colonies, many of which were subsequently appended to religious journals such as the *Evangelical Magazine*.³³ A significant

³² See Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati, 1500–1830* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 112–13.

³³ There were varying missionary movements based on differing denominations within India, with different methods that competed against one another for resources and spheres of influence. However, while their methods differed, their broad objectives of converting Indians to Christians make them fit for comparison. See Jeffrey Cox,

proportion of *memsahibs* had sympathies with Evangelical Christianity and saw the need to spread the word in India and morally improve the colonial administration.³⁴ Sherwood was affiliated to missionary groups and made greater efforts to proselytize than most *memsahibs*. She was closely associated with the Clapham Evangelicals, such as Henry Martyn and Daniel Corrie, who were making ambitious efforts to proselytize in the subcontinent. Sherwood attempted to convert her servants using a Hindustani translation of the Bible. Wherever her husband was stationed, she established religious schools for orphans of officers who had died in India and for half-caste children. She was, furthermore, involved in a project, which was patronized by various missionary groups, to make an Indianized version of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) that would be adapted to the "tastes" and "prejudices" of Indians.³⁵ In this respect Sherwood's involvement with missionary movements gave her agency as a woman within colonial India, even though her voice as a middle-class lady was somewhat constrained by prevailing gender mores.

Through her friendships with influential missionaries Sherwood would have been aware of the huge obstacles they faced in converting Indians, such as translating the Bible into indigenous languages, conflicts with the East India Company, and the resistance of Indians who resented proselytizing.³⁶ The marginalization of Christian discourse within colonial India is played out in the narrative when Emily advocates to her husband the benefits of converting the Indians to Christianity, to which Desmond responds by offering disingenuous excuses. By making Desmond offer insubstantial reasons for not embarking on a mission to convert the "natives," Sherwood is critiquing the ambivalent and evasive response of colonial administrators to the calls of missionaries to enable them in their efforts, as the administrators feared any intervention concerning indigenous religions

Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940 (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), p. 3.

³⁴ See Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in Eighteenth Century India* (1932; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 140-41.

³⁵ See Sherwood, journal, 1808-11, pp. 480-81, 522, 553.

³⁶ See Thorne, *Congregational Missions*, pp. 124-54.

would cause widespread unrest among Indians.³⁷ Desmond's dismissive reply is by the same token a rebuke to the feminine perspective of the *memsahib* seeking morally to improve and regulate the masculine imperial endeavor.

It is notable, though, that morally upright fictional female characters Emily and Mrs. Melmoth in *The History of George Desmond* are very much consigned to the domestic sphere and marginalized as advocacy voices within the narrative. Emily conforms to the trope of a tragically doomed angel, and Mrs. Melmoth's significance lies chiefly in being married to the Evangelical Mr. Melmoth and in providing palliative care to Desmond within the confines of her own home. Thus, although Emily expresses a critique of a male-dominated colonial administration, neither Mrs. Melmoth nor Emily herself are endowed with any capacity to have any impact in terms of contributing to wider public discourses that could potentially undercut or offer an alternative to the largely secular values of the Company administration. They are similarly denied an opportunity within the narrative to participate in broader Evangelical proselytizing activities within the subcontinent.

In these respects, both Emily and Mrs. Melmoth provide a marked contrast to Sherwood herself, who gained a measure of agency in the public sphere in India through her involvement in various Evangelical proselytizing activities in India. *The History of George Desmond*, furthermore, differs from Sherwood's other fictional works set in India, in which various English women characters play a key role within the narrative in either educating Anglo-Indian children, introducing Indians to the Bible, or in establishing Christian institutions for "natives."³⁸ In contrast, Emily and Mrs. Melmoth in Sherwood's Gothic novel are constructed entirely through the viewpoint of Desmond, the novel's first-person male narrator, and are consequently

³⁷ Penelope Carson, "Missionaries, Bureaucrats and the People of India 1793–1833," in *Orientalism, Evangelicalism and the Military Cantonment in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, ed. Nancy G. Cassels (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), pp. 125–55.

³⁸ See Mary Sherwood, *Arzoomund* (London: Houlston & Son, 1829); Mary Sherwood, *The Ayah and her Lady. Conversations on The Ten Commandments* (Christian Literature Society for India: London and Madras, 1902); and Mary Sherwood, *The History of Little Lucy and her Dhaye* (Wellington: Salop, 1825).

denied any agency outside his limited misogynistic framing of an idealized notion of Anglicized bourgeois femininity.

In addition to the relatively limited means of empowerment for the *memsahib* in India, Sherwood's novel differs from her other, more overtly catechetical narratives, such as *The Indian Pilgrim* or *The Ayah and the Lady*, and from her children's stories *Little Henry and his Bearer* or *The History of Lucy and her Dhaye*, in that *The History of George Desmond* does not conclude with Indians being converted to Christianity. In this novel, rather, the indigenous population feel no emotional bond to their colonial *sahibs* or *memsahibs*. All the main Indian protagonists are presented as inherently wicked and remain morally unredeemed at the end. On one level this portrayal reflects the novel's awareness of the limited impact that missionaries had in terms of converting Indians to Christianity. It is also reflective of broader anxieties about the lack of control that the colonizers had upon their colonized subjects. In this narrative, one is aware of the power that servants and Indians could have in colonial India. Indeed, even though the East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attempted to prevent officials and families from intermingling with Indians, the single-story open bungalow design of most colonial houses meant that the private sphere was open to the gaze and constant trespassing of servants to an extent not seen in most British bourgeois homes during this period.³⁹ In addition, since British *sahibs* and *memsahibs* were often not fluent in Indian languages, they depended heavily on Indian servants for their everyday dealings. Desmond, within the narrative, becomes ever more dependent on his head servant Shumsheer, who manages his finances and controls his household.

It is illuminating to compare and contrast the representation of the Indian servant in *The History of George Desmond* with Sherwood's own experiences of interacting with servants as documented in her journals. As the wife of a colonial official, Sherwood, in a similar fashion to other *memsahibs*, had extensive experience of forging relationships with Indian servants

³⁹ E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947* (London: Polity Press, 2001), p. 103.

and dealing with them on an everyday basis.⁴⁰ She was well aware that the power dynamic between the British and their Indian servants was never straightforward, remarking in her journal: “the object of every servant in every department is to make as much money as he can—& when there is any resistance on the part of the master the general plan is to wear them out.” She further notes that “very ingenious are these natives in administering these small irritations.”⁴¹ Indeed, as Sherwood’s private journals show, Indian servants could to an extent evade British mastery over them by executing a task poorly, pretending they could not understand their masters, stealing, or manipulating situations in their favor.⁴² *The History of George Desmond*, in acknowledging the agency of the servant, stands in contrast to Sherwood’s catechetical or children’s narratives. In *Little Henry and his Bearer* or *Lucy and her Dhaye*, servants respect and loyally follow their *sahibs* and *memsahibs*, and while in *The Ayah and her Lady* the *Ayah* tries to get away with menial offenses, she is always caught out by her all-knowing *sahib* or *memsahib*.

In fact, in some instances *The History of George Desmond* actually inverts modes of colonial surveillance. This is particularly evident when Desmond retreats to an inner room in order to get some privacy and to reflect upon his abject condition, only to see Shumsheer viewing him keenly in this intimate moment of self-reflection:

I believed myself to be alone: but, upon suddenly looking up, I perceived Shumsheer standing at the head of my couch. His presence was at this time peculiarly unacceptable to me. How long he had been there I knew not; nor could I tell what he might have heard or observed. But upon discovering him, I became extremely irritated, and, springing up from my couch, I demanded in his own language, what had brought him there; at

⁴⁰ Sherwood’s real-life experiences of Indian servants were bitter, as she suspected her *Ayah* of poisoning her son, which was the probable inspiration for the poisoning of Emily in *The History of George Desmond*. See Grossman, “Ayahs, Dhayes, and Bearers,” p. 18.

⁴¹ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 1, 1801–[1803], p. 221.

⁴² See Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p. 136.

the same time striking him a blow on the head, which sent his turban to the other end of the room. He answered calmly, "Did not saheb call?" (*The History of George Desmond*, pp. 179–80)

What is evident here is how hierarchies of knowledge have been turned on their head, with the Indian servant scrutinizing the inner state of mind and emotions of his master. Despite Desmond's best efforts, there is no private space he can retreat to where he will be unseen by his menacing head servant. Moreover, Desmond's violent response to Shumsheer is an act of impotence indicating a loss of self-possession. That Shumsheer remains unmoved amid an act of physical aggression by his *sahib* and gives no indication of why he is scrutinizing Desmond serves to convey that it is the head servant who wields all the power. He can both read his master for his own ends and remain himself inscrutable.

Notwithstanding Sherwood's depiction of the agency of Shumsheer, the novel's portrayal of Shumsheer having "so complete an ascendancy" over his *sahib* and manipulating him at every turn seems too improbable in the context of the general conditions of Indian servants working for Company men at this time (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 117). While acknowledging the servant's agency and the *sahib's* reliance on a servant in the contact zone, as well as the fact that the colonial masters and mistresses did not always understand the motives of their servants, this portrayal belies the way in which power usually resided more with the *sahib* and *memsahib*. This was especially so when one considers that he or she wielded the economic advantages and political clout given their position as agents or adjuncts to colonial power. Thus, the more likely scenario was the delicate balancing act that Sherwood describes in her journals: servants trying to push forward their own agendas and interests, yet at the same time being careful not to go too far for fear of punishment.

Sherwood's depiction of Desmond's Indian *bibi* Amena is similar in some respects to her portrayal of the head servant Shumsheer. As someone with lived experience in India, Sherwood is clearly aware of the agency of Indian *bibis*. As a woman writer, unlike her male counterparts, she was less inclined to

suffer from the flattering delusion that all interracial relationships were due to “native women” being unable to resist the superior charms of the white man, and more inclined to think that pressing financial concerns were often the motivation for engaging in such liaisons.⁴³ On a broader level, Sherwood’s portrayal of the menacing Amena may be indicative of the more general fear of the English *memsahib* in India that the Indian *bibi* could undermine her position by providing sexual gratification or emotional support to the white colonial officer. It is thus no coincidence that Amena has the power to evade and exploit her “master” in a way not recognized in other fictional colonial narratives of this period. Sherwood’s representation of Amena exploiting the English man, while it acknowledges the agency of Indian women, evades the more common reality of white men taking advantage of disparities in class, race, and economic prosperity to have temporary relationships with these *bibis* and abandon them at a moment’s notice, leaving them to take care of their bastard offspring. Desmond treats his *bibi* and her child better than most real-life colonial officers of this period, in that even after he abandons them he still financially provides for them. While Sherwood ignores what was most likely the more common phenomenon in her fictional narrative, she was in reality fully aware of it, as her journals testify. She writes, for instance, in her journal of hearing of Indian women who were “standing with those children on the sands of the river while those children on the river see the last of him & of the vessel which bears him away” (Sherwood, journal, 1815–17, p. 51). She further comments that these young women were left penniless by their white lovers to bring up their children alone and were often further ostracized by their local community for engaging in relationships with white men in the first place (Sherwood, journal, 1815–17, p. 51).

⁴³ Frequently in colonial fiction authored by men in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Indian women ended up desiring British men over “inferior” Indian men. The implication was that Indian men were unfit sexually and emotionally to fulfill the needs of their women. There was frequently a rescue trope deployed in such fiction with white men rescuing brown women from brown men. See Ashok Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions, 1772–1823* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 167.

It is perhaps pertinent here to provide a closer examination of Sherwood's journals. A more in-depth examination of these private journals will highlight the manner in which the *memsahib* in her own life managed the "otherness" of India and the feelings of alienation that she experienced while residing in a foreign land. It will demonstrate the ways Sherwood adapted to her surrounding environment and formed relationships with Indians. A textual analysis of her journals will consequently be helpful in specifically delineating the ways in which *The History of George Desmond* departed from her own experiences in the contact zone.

In her private journals, Sherwood does not merely report instances where Indian women are exploited, but at times even empathizes with these Indian *bibis*. She admits that when she heard of white men abandoning their lovers from the mouths of Indian women themselves, she "could not really bear the recollections of them without tears" (Sherwood, journal, 1815-17, p. 51). At such points in her journals, racial binarisms, as well as notions of self and other, get blurred as she identifies with fellow women callously abandoned by their lovers. It is striking that although Sherwood derides Indian women for being more morally debased by Indian religious practices than men, it is Indian women, rather than men, that she becomes particularly attached to during her residence in the subcontinent. Sherwood documents times where she was dependent on Indian *Ayahs* and reliant on their local knowledge to maintain the health of her children.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Sherwood writes of an Indian woman who nursed her son breaking down in tears when informed that the boy had recently died. At this moment, Sherwood reports that there was an understanding between the Indian woman and herself, further noting: "there are moments of intense feeling in which all distinctions of nations, colours, & casts disappear & in their place there are only remaining between the two human beings an abiding sense of common nature" (Sherwood, journal,

⁴⁴ Sherwood's son, Henry, after being ill for some duration, with Sherwood and her head English servant both failing to nurse him back to health. Sherwood is advised by an Indian woman to employ an Indian *Ayah* familiar with local remedies and illnesses. She does this, and her son Henry subsequently recovers. Sherwood attributes his recovery to the Indian *Ayah*. See Sherwood, journal, 1804-8, p. 131.

1804–8, pp. 371–72). The comments allude to the way in which gender affinity could occasionally transcend racial and class differences, with Sherwood and the Indian *Ayah* both experiencing maternal grief at the loss of a child they loved. Indeed, what her journals point to and allow for are moments of everyday intimacy with Indian women.

Despite Sherwood's intention of not being influenced by India, like many *memsahibs* of this period she became acculturated to her surroundings in a number of ways. She fondly recalls in her journal an Indian *Ayah* who was a former *nautch* girl (like Amena in the novel) singing a Hindustani lullaby to Sherwood's infant son. Sherwood remembers, "her voice was so sweet & a more affectionate creature I never knew" and that years later the author sang this Hindustani song to her children (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 233). Sherwood's appropriation of a Hindustani song is a demonstration of the extent of her own personal acculturation in the contact zone, in that she became so familiar and comfortable with a Hindustani song that she could use it quite naturally in such an intimate moment as lulling her child to sleep.

There are other examples of the author adapting to her surroundings. Despite earlier resolutions in her journals that she was not going to allow her children to learn Hindustani, after a lengthy stay in India, both Sherwood and her children learned the language to a proficient level. In addition, she claims that her Indianized children's narratives evolved out of a specific need to convey religious truths to her schoolchildren who had never been to England and thus could not relate to English stories and expressions. She reports in her journal: "the children could not understand any common English narrative without asking many questions—on reading them an English story—one said what is a barn—do they walk out without *chutta*—are they not afraid of serpents in the grass..." (Sherwood, journal, 1808–11, p. 527).⁴⁵ Her subsequent Indianized children's stories, for which she later became famous, adopted Anglo-Indian vocabulary and Indian surroundings to enable her to communicate to the Anglo-Indian and half-caste children for which she

⁴⁵ "Chutta," or *juta*, is the Hindustani word for shoes.

was responsible. It is symptomatic of the way in which Sherwood both had to acclimatize and to adapt to an alien environment to an extent she never originally anticipated.

Notwithstanding moments of acculturation, Sherwood's private journals reflect instances of favorable or, at the very least, ambivalent responses to Indian aesthetics and culture. In Calcutta, for instance, she comes across "a pagoda half-concealed by trees" that "looked like an ancient Grecian temple." According to her, it had a "dome of red stone" and it was "a beautiful building which reminded" her of "St. Pauls" (Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, p. 3). It is not just noteworthy that Sherwood remarks upon the pagoda's beauty here, but its attraction to her is sanctioned precisely because it aligns with the European neoclassical aesthetics on which St. Paul's was built, if not Christian religious beliefs. Thus, the Indian pagoda is not marked by cultural difference but by similitude to European tastes. Yet the similarity between the dome of a pagoda and that of St. Paul's was more likely borne out of an emotional need to project Englishness onto the Indian pagoda than any actual architectural resemblance. Sherwood seems to be projecting home onto Indian spaces to assuage feelings of alienation and exile.

Furthermore, other cultural influences shaped Sherwood's attitudes toward India. In her private journals, she remarks that her more positive travel and cultural experiences around India reminded her of the *Arabian Nights*, which she read as a child.⁴⁶ In Sherwood's private journals, she often unconsciously displaces the real Indian people, villages, palaces, and towns that she encounters in her travels into an *Arabian Nights* dreamscape. For instance, after visiting Jaffer Ali Khan's gardens and palace in Calcutta, Sherwood remarks:

⁴⁶ See Sherwood, journal, 1804–8, pp. 367–68. In a similar fashion, she says that when she listens to Hindustani and Persian music it reminds her of the "Arabian & Persian Tales" that she read as a child and made her fantasize about the "courts of Baghdad," "splendid dynasties" and "beautiful sultanas." See Sherwood, journal, 1808–11, p. 630. The mention of *Arabian Nights* is further illuminating in that its translator, Antoine Galland, provided a generalized and fantastical depiction of the Orient, rather than culturally and regionally specific depictions of countries within Asia and the Middle East. See Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, pp. 44–45.

Every thing which we had seen during these last few days reminded me of these descriptions in Arabian & Persian Tales which I had so greatly delighted as a child & it is undoubtedly the greatest possible proof of the accuracy of these descriptions in India as are described in these tales I saw them as things as perfectly familiar to my imagination.⁴⁷

Similarly, when Sherwood sees Daniel Corrie's head servant, Shumsheer (on whom Desmond's servant in her novel is based), accompanied by black dwarves, she is "affected" with the "idea of Aladdin & his black slaves" (Sherwood, journal, 1808–11, p. 562). Sherwood here seems to be engaging in a displacement technique that allows her to order Indian landscapes and peoples to conform to an Orientalist childhood fantasy, thus rendering them as innocuous sites of play rather than a disorienting threat.

In addition to unconsciously or consciously displacing Indian places and peoples into an Oriental dreamscape as a coping strategy to deal with unfamiliar sights, Sherwood deployed other objectifying processes when viewing India and its inhabitants. This is evident when she remarks at one point that while they look ugly, malformed, and dissipated when up close in a native bazaar or village, when viewed from a *budgerow* Indian women were "far from plain." According to Sherwood, their "hands are delicate, their skin soft—the forms of their faces good, their eyes fine—their dresses beautiful when seen at a distance" (Sherwood, journal, 1801–[1803], unnumbered).⁴⁸ Sherwood's privileging of a panoramic mode of surveillance over a close-up view aligned with the proliferation of colonialist representations of India of this period, which often favored producing forms of knowledge of the subcontinent that were derived from looking at Indian landscapes and its inhabitants from a distance—i.e., from a *budgerow*, *palanquin*, or a mountain, rather than from amidst an urban crowd.⁴⁹ From far away British viewers could be empowered with the illusion of

⁴⁷ Mary Sherwood, journal, in Sherwood Family Papers (Collection 1437), box 1, 1801–[1803], unnumbered.

⁴⁸ A *budgerow* is a large boat.

⁴⁹ See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), p. 10. A *palanquin* is a handheld carriage.

control. Viewing from amidst a crowd could alternatively be a disempowering experience in that the imagined distance between self and other was blurred and transgressed.

There are clearly misalignments between the way Sherwood's novel and her private journals relate to Indianized spaces and cultural aesthetics. While in Sherwood's novel Indian and Indianized sites become markers of the self's degeneration, this is not always the case in her private journals. The novel adopts the perspective of a young male narrator who is unable to adopt a detached and generalized gaze in the way Sherwood believes she can when viewing *nautches* or when surveying Indian landscapes or indigenous inhabitants. Moreover, Desmond is unable to displace such scenes into a harmless Oriental dreamscape or to project Englishness onto any of the Indian spaces he encounters.

What is further notable is that Sherwood deliberately does not explore the subjectivity of Amena or Shumsheer in *The History of George Desmond*. She provides no explanation of their motives to manipulate and destroy Desmond and Emily. Unlike many fictional colonial narratives of this period, there is no act of ventriloquism where the British author attempts to speak through Indian characters, either in terms of imagining their grievances or using their words to endorse their subjugation. Sherwood's novel evades any rational explanation for Amena's or Shumsheer's motivations, thus leaving the reader to ascribe their behavior to the active malice, greed, or unexplainable ingratitude of the colonized. There are no moments that Desmond demonstrates genuine cross-cultural understanding for or sympathetic identification with the colonized other—which Sherwood experienced, as documented in her journals.

During Sherwood's time in the subcontinent, the *memsahib* reported encountering two real-life figures called Shumsheer and Amena, who presumably provide the inspiration for the characters in her novel. Amena, as described in Sherwood's journals, was the indolent Muslim wife to a Persian man called Sabah. The real-life Amena, according to Sherwood, "slept where she had sate all day" and had "little idea of using the needle" and had not been taught any "feminine accomplishments" (Sherwood, journal, 1808–11, p. 160). Thus, rather than

being the predatory and oversexualized Indian woman portrayed in *The History of George Desmond*, Amena, as presented in Sherwood's journals, is merely an example of the general indolence of the Eastern woman standing in contradistinction to the ideal middle-class English woman who is industrious, yet whose industriousness is safely confined to the bourgeois domestic sphere. Similarly, Sherwood notes coming across "a great tall majestic Musulman of the name of Shumsheer" who was the servant of her friend Daniel Corrie. In her journals, Shumsheer is described as an upstart servant with pretensions above his station (Sherwood, journal, 1808–11, p. 558). In terms of Sherwood's everyday experiences in the subcontinent, both Shumsheer and Amena were rather innocuous figures mentioned in passing and in a mildly derisory tone. Furthermore, while in the journals both Shumsheer and Amena are clearly defined as Muslims, in the novel both characters take on monstrously threatening qualities, and their religion is left unspecified. They fulfill a narrative function of the Gothic literary text, thus becoming dark alter egos to the central white protagonists, threatening them with destruction. Within this context, if Sherwood assigned the religion of Islam to Shumsheer and Amena, it would run counter to the novel's aim to "other" these characters, given that Islam shares with Christianity certain monotheistic assumptions and belief systems. Sherwood's ambiguity regarding assigning their religion and her description of Amena as an "idolatrous female" is pointed in that it leads the reader to assume that Indians, regardless of whether they are Muslims or Hindus, are morally depraved heathens tainted by the paganistic practices of Hinduism (*The History of George Desmond*, p. 231).

In Sherwood's didactic children's stories, such as *Lucy and her Dhaye* and *Little Henry and his Bearer*, sentimentalism is deployed as a narrative strategy to convey an emotional bond—albeit in a patronizing and condescending tone—between the colonizer and her or his servants. While Sherwood's private journals abound in racial stereotyping, there are moments in them of slippage between the construction of self and the racialized other, where sympathetic identification across racial and class boundaries transpires. Moreover, Sherwood found a degree of agency as a white woman in India through participating in

various Evangelical outreach efforts. In *The History of George Desmond*, however, there is no cross-cultural understanding between the colonizer and colonized, and the influence of the women characters is limited to the domestic sphere. The reasons why Sherwood purely promulgates a monolithic depiction of racial difference and why women are denied any agency outside the confines of their own homes can be found in the stated function of the novel. *The History of George Desmond* is an admonitory text to warn young men of the potential pitfalls and dangers they may face in India. In this respect, the novel is intended to supplement the administrative literature distributed to East India Company cadets before embarking to India in order to prepare them for the challenges that they are likely to experience there. The novel calls young men to identify with George Desmond and thus see how even a well-intentioned and promising young Englishman can easily get corrupted by the experience of India and close contact with its indigenous inhabitants. Within this context, Sherwood emphasizes the threat India poses to the English men and women by deploying Gothic tropes. Shumsh-eer and Amena thus become dark doubles who threaten their white counterparts with death and destruction. The author's disavowal of their subjectivities adds to their threatening menace. In effect Sherwood's deployment of Gothic literary tropes has amplified racial difference and has not allowed space for moments of cross-cultural sympathy, which are present in both Sherwood's private journals and her catechetical stories.

The History of George Desmond is in itself an interesting case study of how the use of a particular literary mode and style can have significant consequences in terms of accentuating racial prejudice. Notwithstanding this reading, though, Sherwood's deployment of the Gothic in the novel, and its completely derisory position toward the subcontinent, takes her to a problematic and contradictory place that does not sit well with her position as a wife of a colonial official or as a missionary. It raises questions and dilemmas that the novel never succeeds in answering. If Indians are morally depraved and irredeemable, and if there is no understanding or emotional bond between colonizer or colonized, then what is the purpose of efforts to attempt to convert the inhabitants to Christianity?

Where is the justification that colonialism will civilize India or is for the good of Indians? Furthermore, on that note, if the likelihood is that promising young English men are likely to have their lives ruined in the contact zone through exposure to India and its culture, then is the colonial enterprise worth it? The fact that the narrative leaves these questions unanswered may be why Sherwood felt unable to put her name to her novel *The History of George Desmond*. Yet while the author was keen to sideline it, this novel, when read both alongside and against Sherwood's private journals, as well as within the broader context of early-nineteenth-century British India, provides an invaluable case study of the anxieties, contradictions, and dilemmas that many British men and women faced when in the contact zone.

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ABSTRACT

Ashok Malhotra, "The English 'Self' under Siege: A Comparison of a Memsahib's Private Journals and her Novel *The History of George Desmond*" (pp. 1–34)

This paper examines Mary Sherwood's *The History of George Desmond* (1821) alongside and against the author's private journals to demonstrate the ways in which the novel both aligned with and veered away from Sherwood's own personal experiences as a *memsahib* living in colonial India. It argues that while the novel reflects her awareness of the agency of colonized Indians and the precarious predicament of the colonizer in the subcontinent, its deployment of Gothic literary modes had the effect of accentuating racism and disorientation in the contact zone. This essay argues that while the *memsahib*'s private journals allowed space for moments when racial and class distinctions were temporarily eroded, the novel's prescriptive genre constraints did not allow for such occurrences. It further argues that the novel's admonitory function and use of Gothic literary tropes led Sherwood to raise problematic questions about the colonial endeavor, which are left unanswered by the narrative.

Keywords: Mary Sherwood; *The History of George Desmond*; colonialism; India in British literature; *memsahib*